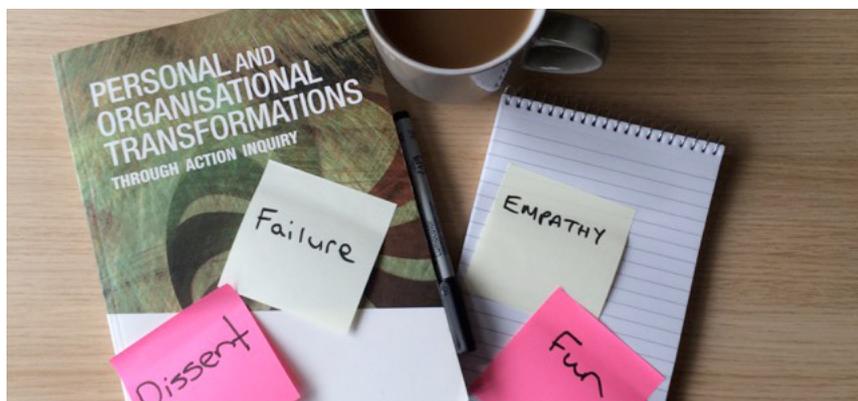


# Research Brief

POLICY@SUSSEX | MAY 2016



## Supporting cultural change to improve equality and diversity in Higher Education

### INTRODUCTION

The UK higher education sector needs a new approach to improve equality and diversity. In September 2015, Business Secretary Sajid Javid asked the representative organisation Universities UK to investigate 'lad culture' and violence against women<sup>1</sup>. This followed recent publicity about survey findings on bullying and harassment in higher education<sup>2</sup>. In addition the shortage of academics from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds has been revisited recently in media debates and by the government<sup>3</sup>. Early in 2016, David Cameron made public statements about the lack of diversity in relation to ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background, amongst students at elite universities<sup>4</sup>.

These conversations are not new and some initiatives have already been implemented to tackle equality and diversity issues. Examples include:

- The Athena Swan charter mark scheme for gender equality
- Widening participation programmes to diversify student recruitment
- Initiatives to increase awareness of potential 'unconscious bias'

It is argued however that these tend to operate at surface level and can actually serve to shut down discussion: the existence of policies and initiatives can be proof enough that institutions are fulfilling their commitments<sup>5</sup>. The persistence of serious equality and diversity issues despite these policies and initiatives suggests there could be deeper cultural issues that are not being addressed.

### Summary

There is a clear need in the UK higher education sector for a different approach to equality and diversity issues.

This briefing outlines research being conducted by Dr Alison Phipps and Dr Liz McDonnell at Imperial College London with the following aims:

- 1) To describe Imperial's 'institutional culture' and the impact this has on equality and diversity;
- 2) To develop ideas for cultural change.

Through the research on Imperial College's institutional culture Dr Phipps and Dr McDonnell have developed an innovative methodology: Grounded Action Inquiry.

This methodology takes Action Inquiry approaches and grounds them in research data. In this case research data about institutional culture.

This brings about cultural change through embedding new modes of thinking and developing appropriate new initiatives.

The implementation of this new methodology will be the subject of the next briefing.



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## INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

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'Institutional culture' is the values, beliefs and practices members of an institution share and that new members must adopt<sup>6</sup>. This goes deeper than written policies, and can in some cases contradict them. An institution's values, beliefs and practices interact with social categories such as gender, race and class. People with particular characteristics (often dominant social, economic and cultural) find themselves better equipped to survive institutional cultures than others.

Institutional cultures also exist in a social context<sup>7</sup> and within structures such as democracy, the capitalist market, the bureaucratic state, and religion<sup>8</sup>. Universities exist within the higher education sector, which incorporates values such as competition, individualism and evaluation, and practices such as the league tables and the REF.

In-depth and sustained research is needed to describe the culture of an institution. It is also important to prioritise the voices and experiences of those who may be marginalised by it. Our research draws on standpoint theory that argues those marginalised by a particular culture may be better able to gain a critical understanding of it<sup>9</sup>.

The first phase of our research described and analysed Imperial College's institutional culture using answers to the following questions:

1. What are the stated values of the institution, both outward- and inward-facing?
2. What are its experienced values, and do these differ?
3. Are there any commonly held beliefs about the institution?
4. How do people experience and feel about working/studying there?
5. What are the characteristics of the work/study environment(s)?
6. What challenges do people identify, and how do they deal with them?
7. Where are the areas of conflict?

A variety of methods were used to find answers to these questions: exploring the physical space of the institution (for instance, its buildings and facilities); looking at key policies and texts; finding out about the experiences and perceptions of staff and students; observing meetings, teaching and other institutional practices; and reviewing the institution's history.

## GROUNDING ACTION INQUIRY FOR CULTURAL CHANGE

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The second phase of our research that is currently underway involves using Action Inquiry to suggest a culture change programme. Action Inquiry brings members of an institution together to discuss themes and issues, generate ideas for action, and then reflect on how that action is implemented. It has been used successfully in private and public sector organisations such as BP and the Ministry of Defence. At Imperial College, the Action Inquiry process will be grounded in themes from our initial data collection. These themes are intentionally open, to help the institution explore issues rather than rushing solutions which might not tackle the root causes of problems. This process aims to develop 'change agents' across different levels of the institution, and embed new modes of thinking for deeper-seated change.

Our Grounded Action Inquiry at Imperial College will involve groups of people working from general themes such as 'fun', 'empathy', 'dissent', and 'failure'. These groups will be designed either through existing organisational communication structures such as team/management meetings, or through the formation of new groups. Staff and students at all levels will take part and create their own knowledge and actions. This allows the institution to have ownership of the process for cultural change.

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